



Bridgewater Review

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 6

Jun-2007

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Thomas R. (2007). Researching and Writing a New College History. *Bridgewater Review*, 26(1), 7-9.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol26/iss1/6

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Researching and Writing a New College History

Tom Turner

The following are notes for a talk I have given in various forums on my research for a new history of Bridgewater State College.

I don't know what possessed me to do it, but since I have been a faculty member in the History Department here at Bridgewater for 36 years, I recently divided 36 by 166. I came up with a figure of roughly 22%, meaning that I have been here for nearly a quarter of the college's



Sarah Lewis

history. I eventually reversed these figures so I could say I hadn't been here for 78 percent of the school's history, since the original figure made me feel a bit old. When you have been here as long as I have, the college's history inevitably becomes your own history.

I want to say how indebted I am to those who have gone before me, and to those who are currently

working in this area, since Bridgewater has been fortunate to have had many people interested in its history. This list includes Albert Gardner Boyden, faculty member and third Principal of Bridgewater Normal School from 1860-1906, Arthur Clarke Boyden, also a faculty member and fourth Principal of the Normal School and son of Albert, Jordan Fiore, long-time Chair of History at Bridgewater State College, Dave Wilson, who was an undergraduate student here and now works in our publicity department (if you are not on Dave's daily email newsletter you should be at www.bridgewater2005.com) and my long-time colleague in the History Department and friend Ben Spence, who has generously shared with me his research, particularly from the *Bridgewater Independent*.

In a limited article like this I would never try to provide complete details for the entire history of the college from 1840-2007. What I do want to convey are some of the resources I have used, and what is available to scholars of our history both on and off campus. Despite the great fire which destroyed several buildings in



December 1924, there are many resources (including primary sources) in our archives. For example, there are numbers of letters from Nicholas Tillinghast, the first Bridgewater Normal School Principal from 1840-1853, among whose claims to fame are that he taught Robert E. Lee when he was an instructor at West Point, though I'm not sure how loudly we want to boast about that. There is also a letter from Cyrus Peirce, the first Principal at Lexington Normal School, the first founded in the country, to Marshall Conant, the second Principal of Bridgewater Normal School, in which he complains that he hadn't accomplished much.

Bridgewater can also boast the first female Principal of a Normal School, Julia Sears, who was ultimately demoted, primarily to give the job at Mankato Normal School to a male. This precipitated a strike and student expulsions. Sears eventually went on to a very successful career at Vanderbilt University.

Until recently we believed that Mary Hudson Onley was the first African-American graduate in 1912. But one of my most exciting discoveries was that one Sarah Lewis, who graduated in 1879, was actually our first African-American graduate. This was a true example of serendipity in research, as I put my hand on the relevant album purely by chance. I was able to track down records of Sarah's admission, her later teaching career, places of residence and so on. Phil Silvia, also of our History Department, has discovered that Sarah Lewis' sister was married to Harold Lattimer, who worked with Thomas Edison, and is in our Hall of Black Achievement (HOBA).

There are letters and other materials about a Japanese student named Shuje Isawa, who had an enormous impact on education in Japan after his time at Bridgewater. Isawa worked for a time for Alexander Graham Bell and has the distinction of having spoken the first words in Japanese over Bell's telephone. The Boydens (Albert and



Mary Hudson Onley

his wife) and Isawa were extremely fond of one another, and some books Isawa gave the Boydens still exist in the collection. I probably would not have stumbled on this connection without an internet search of the Bell Papers, a connection unlikely to have been made in the pre-internet era. Yet, Isawa was only one of many foreign students who came here from many other places,



Albert Gardner Boyden

including Chile, Mexico, Jamaica, and Turkey.

As Principal at Bridgewater, Albert Gardner Boyden was known nationally for the “Bridgewater Model” which emphasized the value of training women to teach in elementary schools. At the time there was a system of “Visitors,” members of the Board of Education who closely oversaw the

operations of each school. Among the Bridgewater Visitors was Phillips Brooks, a minister who wrote “O Little Town of Bethel,” Thomas Wentworth Higginson, author of *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, and Alice Freeman Palmer, the first woman president of Wellesley College. Palmer, given her connections to both Bridgewater and Wellesley, may have been at the center of what has become a bit of a mystery about our respective college mottos. Bridgewater State College’s motto, “Not to be ministered unto, but to minister,” is clearly an English version of the motto of Wellesley College, which was in Latin. Today the Wellesley motto is in English also, and reads “Not to be served, but to serve.” The question is, which school got there first?

Apparently, student social life was pretty rigid by our modern standards. As an example consider the expulsion of a Miss Howe and a Miss Ryder in 1890 for daring to walk downtown with two young men. The records hold numerous examples of ‘Pa’ Boyden asking frightening questions at daily assemblies (“How many windows are there on the left wall of this building?”) and imposing a rule against a young man canoeing with a young lady on nearby Carver Pond.

Arthur C. Boyden (1906–1933) labored in the shadow of his more celebrated father, though I feel he was underappreciated. He was a tireless worker and awarded two Honorary Doctorates from Amherst and Rhode Island College. He kept extensive notebooks, both

chronologically and by topic which, incidentally, are badly in need of preservation. I don’t know when he slept. He also found time to give countless lectures at various institutions, and was active in the Nature and Garden Movement.

I have found that the modern period is tougher to research. The materials of more recent college leaders are quite limited by comparison with their predecessors. However, Adrian Rondileau was here for more than a quarter of a century, long enough that there are ways of getting good information about his administration. And fortunately Adrian Tinsley is still with us. Hopefully, all presidents in the future will copy the model of current college president, Dana Mohler-Faria, a student of history whose records will certainly be thorough and accessible.



Arthur Clarke Boyden

For the modern period we have to rely on resources like *Bridgewater Today*, *The Comment*, *Hard Times*, and the *Alumni News* and *Bridgewater Magazine*. Publications such as these clearly paint a picture of very activist students in the 1960s, a fact that wasn’t apparent to me until I did the research. (Just because you lived through a time doesn’t mean you necessarily have a full comprehension of the history.) There were a number of confrontations with the administration, not the least of which was a strike over the firing of philosophy professor Donald Dunbar. The dispute was settled by allowing the three segments of the college community to vote. I have gained even more admiration for my friend Dave Wilson, who works in the Public Affairs office of the college. As a student at Bridgewater, Dave was editor of the student newspaper, the *Comment*. In that time of turmoil he stood up for free speech, publishing, among other items, Eldredge Cleaver’s “Black Moochie,” Cleaver’s raw, autobiographical reminiscence of growing up in Los Angeles. At the time other publications on state college campuses were being shut down for doing publishing such work, and even now I would find it hard to read to you some of the language of that never-completed book.

I have also come to appreciate some lesser known, but very important graduates, not the least of whom was 1923 graduate Louise Dickinson Rich, who I see as one of our most prominent graduates of the 20th century. Ben Spence kept urging me to read Rich’s *Innocence*

Under the Elms, with which I was honestly not familiar. I did, and now I highly recommend this delightful work about growing up in Bridgewater, attending the Model School, and assorted insights about the town and college. Rich published many other books and articles, including the classic *We Took to the Woods* which is about living in Maine. She was a friend of Ernest Hemingway's, and her obituary appeared in the *New York Times* when she died at 88 in 1991. Rich was something of a character, planting poison ivy and disrupting a graduation by playing tennis during, and next to, a college graduation. In 1955 when she returned to her alma mater, she publicly observed that Faulkner's writing was "the most obtuse rot she had ever read."

I have also visited a number of archives off campus, some of which I am still using. These include those at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard and the Frank Speare Papers at Northeastern. At the Massachusetts Historical Society I read the letters that Nicholas Tillinghast, the first president of Bridgewater State College, sent to Horace Mann. They reveal, among other things, that Tillinghast, a confirmed bachelor, apparently married at the age of 35, mainly because principals were expected to be married. He sought Horace Mann's advice when it was rumored that Boston abolitionists, frustrated in their attempts to get African-Americans admitted to Boston schools, were planning to enroll some of these students at Bridgewater. We don't have Mann's response, but it certainly would have been favorable since the African-American student Chloe Lee boarded with Mann and his wife when she couldn't find lodging at West Newton.

There is also a rich collection of Boyden materials in the Special Collections library at the State House thanks to Caleb Tillinghast, secretary/treasurer of the Massachusetts Board of Education, and the State Librarian. Among the materials is Boyden's embarrassed letter to Tillinghast when he discovered that he had made a \$2 error in his accounts.

As I indicated, I eventually reached a point in my research where the college's history seemed to become interlaced with my own. In 1940 there is a delightful *Comment* article about Jordan Fiore's experiences as a student teacher in Fall River. I taught with Dr. Fiore for about twenty years before his death. It seems Jordan was mistaken for a high school student and was given detention for running in the corridor, and was chas-



Shuje Isawa

tised for sitting in an area in the library that was reserved for teachers. And just to note an even more personal instance of the overlap between college and personal history, I also came upon a mid-1970's *Comment* article about a faculty-student basketball game held to benefit the Martin T. Rizzo Scholarship. Rizzo was a student who died from injuries he received while

playing football. While the faculty lost that game, the *Comment* noted that only the tenacious rebounding of one Professor Tom Turner and Mr. David Morwick, now Director of Administrative Services at the college, kept the game close.

These are some of the building blocks I am using but I will also be attempting to place the history in broader context. The last thing I personally need to keep in mind is that I'm not trying to reproduce Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I hope that in 250-300 pages I can capture the major trends in the Bridgewater story. In 1846, when Horace Mann came here to dedicate the new school building, he said "Coiled up in this institution, as in a spring, there is a vigor whose uncoiling may wheel the spheres." Like any institution, Bridgewater has had its ups and downs over its long history, including that terribly damaging fire and a president, Gerry Indelicato, who resigned his Bridgewater State College presidency while under indictment for forgery and fraud. However, surveying all the good and the bad I suspect that even Mann might be a bit surprised and pleased at the uncoiling which has occurred in a school that started 166 years ago in the town hall basement with just 28 students, and which is now a multi-purpose college of over 9,000 students that is currently exploring university status.

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